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The Plays of Wole Soyinka: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Introduction:

This research study intends to study the dramatic world of the Nobel Prize winning Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka (b.1934) using his ten major plays written and staged during the postcolonial period (1960- 2000) as the resource. As the period under scrutiny formed the peak of Soyinka's literary career, this study employs the postcolonial perspective to underline his artistic credo, thematic concerns and world-view. It offers an in-depth exploration of the selected plays with an added emphasis on his characters and their philosophy. The plays selected for this study are *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *The Road* (1965), *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *The Scourge of Hyacinths* (1992) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996). While elucidating the central argument, the study gives incidental references to other plays in Soyinka's oeuvre for elucidating the central argument. These plays have been chosen carefully because they illustrate the best the main issues this study will focus on. Moreover, they are most representative of Soyinka as a playwright. The study complements the existing studies of the comprehensive repertoire of Soyinka's dramatic corpus as illustrated in the works of eminent scholar-critics.

Soyinka's highly productive literary career spans nearly six decades writing several plays, poems, novels and critical essays. As a dramatist, Soyinka has been

influenced by, among others, the Irish playwright, J.M. Synge. His dramatic art is distinguished by his skillful blending of the traditional elements from the popular African theatre with its combination of dance, music, and action and the modern theatrical devices. He wrote his first plays during his time in London, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* (a light comedy), which were performed at Ibadan in 1958 and 1959 and were published in 1963. Later, satirical comedies are *The Trial of Brother Jero* publ. 1963 with its sequel, Jero's *Metamorphosis* (1973), *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). Among Soyinka's serious philosophic plays include *The Strong Breed* (performed 1966, publ. 1963), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Soyinka has written many poems and two novels, *The Interpreters* (1965), and *Season of Anomy* (1973) which is based on the writer's thoughts during his imprisonment and confronts the Orpheus and Euridice myth with the mythology of the Yoruba.

The present study concentrates on Soyinka's ten selected plays that reflect the postcolonial context. For example, his philosophical play *The Strong Breed* (1964) is one of his best known plays presenting an individual tragedy and sacrifice for the sake of the communal benefit. The play is centered on the tradition of egungun, a Yoruba festival tradition in which a scapegoat of the village carries out the evil of the community and is exiled from the civilization. Eman, the play's protagonist, takes on the role of "carrier", knowing it will result in beating and exile. He does this to spare a young simpleton the same fate. The ritual takes an unexpected turn as Eman flees, but ultimately gets a tragic death. Similarly, *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play that tells the historically accurate events of the tragic demise of Elesin, a Yoruban king's horseman, and the moment of cosmic crisis that this brings upon his culture as a whole. As the king's horseman it is Elesin's role to follow his king into death through self-sacrifice. The moment of outward crisis comes for the Yoruba when Elesin's self-sacrifice is stopped by the British District Officer who sees the act as a suicide that breaks civilized, legal, religious, and moral codes. It was actually Elesin's own pride and lust for the material goods of this life that caused his hesitation to commit the self-sacrifice. This moment of

hesitation granted the District Officer enough time to disrupt the ritual. This story is extremely relevant to both postcolonial concepts of art and political/cultural self-projections by nations in a postcolonial situation. It contextualizes colonialism as a matter of modern history and allows art and culture to go beyond and deeper into the innate human soul to find its sources of creation. Art produced in a postcolonial situation, even within the framework of colonial difference and oppression, is not confined to finding its roots in imperial opposition.

Postcolonialism or post-colonial studies gained prominence since 1960s, more particularly when the political independent countries from the British rule started to rewrite their history, myth, cultural traditions and indigenous conventions. The postcolonial theorists and practitioners like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gauri Vishwanathan, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak have developed the theory of colonialism and its aftermath in their works such as Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990). They elaborated how the indigenous world of the native is thus corrupted by using the so-called supremacy myths and attributing the opposite qualities of what they represent reason, sophistication and morality. Thus the postcolonial discourse can be viewed as "the curse of Caliban's children" such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Nadine Gordimer and J.M.Coetzee from South Africa, Derek Walcott and George Lamming from the West Indies, Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai from India, and so on. It has inaugurated a new movement characterized by the denial of the heritage of imperialism in the rest of the world and reclamation of indigenous cultural heritage. What Frank Fanon remarks in his seminal opus *The Wretched of Earth* (1961) is worth recalling here:"….It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes" (Qtd. in Digole,2020: 177)

Objectives of the study:

The principal objective of the study is to make an in-depth critical appraisal of Soyinka's ten representative plays. Some of the objectives of this study are noted down below:

- To explore the dramatic world of Wole Soyinka as presented in the selected plays and highlight its contemporary relevance in the postcolonial world.
- To explain the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions reflected in the plays with a view to elaborate the playwright's philosophic vision and theatrical craftsmanship.
- To establish Wole Soyinka as a committed playwright profoundly concerned with the contemporary socio-cultural and political issues.
- To study the selected plays from the perspective of colonial and post-colonial dynamics and illustrate the prevalent conditions.
- To analyse the fundamental question of political identity formation and relationship between myth and history, tradition and modernity and so on.
- To find out the effect of colonialism/ imperialism on the history, politics and culture of Africa in general and post-independent Nigeria in particular.
- To contextualize the postcolonial and postmodern concepts like hybridity, mimicry, identity, race, otherness and rewriting history through a close reading of the selected plays by Wole Soyinka

Hypothesis of the study

A thorough critical interpretation of ten representative plays by Wole Soyinka by adopting a postcolonial perspective forms the core of this study. Such a close textual analysis will assist in evaluating the role of colonial and postcolonial elements in the formulation African identity in the contemporary context.

Review of Literature:

With the exception of a few scholarly studies like Biodun Jeyifo's *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (2003), Mpalive Hangson Msiska's *Post-colonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* (2007), Dr. K. Rajkumar's dissertation on the Plays of Wole Soyinka, Chaudhary Sharjeel's *Language and Identity exploring the Linguistic Postcoloniality in select plays of Wole Soyinka* (2016) and Solanki Jagdishbhai's *Postcolonial Concerns In Wole Soyinka's Plays*: *A Critical Study* (2017), this potential field of literary research remained hitherto neglected. Solanki Jagdishbhai's *Postcolonial Concerns In Wole Soyinka's Plays*: *A Critical Study* (2017) explains the impact of colonialism on the plays of Soyinka leading to postcolonial depiction of the contemporary situations. The sporadic articles on individual plays and passing references given to some of his plays in the critical studies/anthologies fail to give proper justice to his substantial dramatic corpus. Chaudhary Sharjeel's *Language and identity exploring the Linguistic Postcoloniality in select plays of Wole Soyinka* (2016) he explains the linguistic postcoloniality in the plays of Wole Soyinka in this study attempted to achieve a level of comprehensibility and better understanding of the relationship between language and identity while working upon the postcoloniality of the select plays.

Research Methodology and Tentative Chapter Scheme

The research design, used in this study is one of exploratory, analytical and interpretative type. The procedure adopted in the content analysis and description is of both intra-textual and inter-textual nature. The methods common to all disciplines like comparison, contrast, analysis, induction, deduction etc. are also used in this study. MLA 9th edition will be taken for consideration as guideline of citation and other necessary collection arrangement of information. The present study is divided into five chapters planned according to the need of working on specified aspects as per below.

Chapter One : Introduction

The first chapter explains the overall design of the research study and theory of postcolonialism in detail

Chapter Two : Wole Soyinka's bio-literary profile.

Wole Soyinka is best known as a playwright. Alongside his literary career, he has also worked as an actor and in theaters in Nigeria and Great Britain. His outstanding contribution to the English literature earned him the most prestigious literary honour, 'Nobel Prize'. This chapter will cover wole soyinka's all biographical details like his educational background, his early and later life .chapter also focuses on wole soyinka as dramatist, Poet, novelist, satirist, essayist and polemical writer and his major works. His contribution for literature and how he is the most articulate exponent of African culture and eloquent interpreter of its worldview.

Chapter three : Critical analysis of Select plays of Wole Soyinka.

In light of all eight select play's and other available resources this chapter will deal with the critical analysis of the core elements of postcolonism, History, politics and culture. specially How this play's present the Postcolonial literature often addresses the Difficulties and consequences of the decolonization of a countries and
questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racialism and colonialism.

Chapter Four : Postcolonial Contexts in the Select plays of Wole Soyinka.

The ten plays selected for this study- *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *The Road* (1965), *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *The Scourge of Hyacinths* (1992) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996) will be interpreted from a postcolonial perspective and its myriad notions.

Chapter Five : Conclusion

The final chapter of the thesis will summarize the central argument and give the research findings and observations. .

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